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Beat the Heat Don't Walk the Streets

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Stalling on the Las Vegas Wash

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Voter-approved plan to build wetlands still going nowhere

By Larry Paulson
Special to the Review-Journal

Still there are no wetlands.

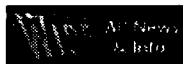
A battle rages in Las Vegas between a handful of us citizens and dozens of government officials and their consultants, the politician's soldiers on the point of local environmental battles. We're fighting about Las Vegas Wash -- a highly eroded, 10-mile gully that drains about 150 million gallons per day of treated sewage, contaminated groundwater and untreated storm water from the valley back to Lake Mead.

All of that water enters the lake just six miles upstream of the Southern Nevada Water Authority's drinking water intakes at Saddle Island. That troubles a lot of people, many of whom now drink bottled water or have installed water treatment devices on their taps. We'd like to see a couple thousand acres of wetlands restored in Las Vegas Wash to help purify that contaminated water before it's returned to the lake.

This battle's been brewing for a long time. A few of us wetlands advocates began pressuring government officials more than 20 years ago to stop the erosion before it gutted the entire wash. We didn't have much success. We were up against insecure water planners who felt the wetlands evaporated too much water, thus decreasing our return flow credits and shorting us on drinking water. Ironically, while they so selfishly guarded every drop of return flow credits, millions of acre feet of surplus Colorado River water slipped through Lake Mead on



By Jim
Day/Review-Journal

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the way to Mexico.

On Nov. 6, 1990, Nevada voters passed the \$47.2-million Question 5 -- a proposal to issue bonds for parks and wildlife. Of that amount, \$13.3 million was earmarked to Clark County for a regional wetlands park in Las Vegas Wash.

Since then, there have been environmental studies, engineering studies, cultural studies and impact studies; scoping meetings, coordination meetings, interagency meetings and public meetings; preliminary plans, master plans and construction plans. The issues have been prioritized, categorized, digitized, computerized and publicized. Clark County has spent well more than \$1 million of the park bond money for consultant studies on the wash.

Still there are no wetlands!

It's not easy rebuilding those wetlands, say the government officials and their consultants. There are environmental restraints, institutional restraints, fiscal restraints and political restraints -- more restraints than an S&M dungeon.

Now, the Harry Reid Center at UNLV reports in a Bureau of Reclamation environmental assessment for the proposed wetlands park that selenium is three times higher than EPA's five parts per billion (ppb) standard and thus poses a danger to wildlife. That conclusion is based on a handful of selenium samples run by engineering students in an uncertified testing laboratory, with unapproved methods and without a public hearing. But let's assume for the moment the results are accurate. Do you realize that you and I can drink that wash water given that it's well below EPA's 50 ppb selenium standard for drinking water? However, according to the Harry Reid Center, it's still a risk to wildlife.

EPA scientists say selenium "bioaccumulates" in the food chain, or gets more concentrated when an insect eats some algae, then a fish eats the insect, a bird eats the fish and a human eats the bird. They say that's why we need a more restrictive selenium standard for wetlands than drinking water.

I guess it's good nothing eats us humans. We're, no doubt, walking toxic waste dumps after "bioaccumulating" selenium and other trace metals over a 70-year life-span. It really makes me wonder: Why do medical doctors often prescribe selenium supplements to boost the immune systems of humans? It would probably be a lot cheaper to eat more ducks from selenium-tainted swamps.

I've got a different take on EPA's selenium

standard for wetlands -- it's more politics than science. That selenium standard is as threatening to wetlands as a developer's dredge. EPA's doing such a good job protecting wildlife that we can't even build wetlands where there's a trace of selenium in the water. I guess we'll just have to give up on rebuilding the wetlands in Las Vegas Wash, and turn it over to developers for more houses. Gee, thanks, EPA. Maybe it's time for you to "reinvent" yourself again, I hope with more attention to your original mission -- environmental protection.

I've concluded after 20 years of frustrating meetings, full of those kinds of bureaucratic restraints, that there will never be wetlands in Las Vegas Wash again, at least not enough to amount to anything. All this talk about restoring those wetlands is just that -- nothing but two-faced talk.

But don't blame us biologists because there are no wetlands in the wash. It's not about biology. Building a wetlands isn't all that complicated. Cattails spring up naturally just about anywhere there is standing or slow-moving water. Drain some street runoff, storm water or sewage effluent into a desert wash, slow down the flow, and you'll soon have a green ribbon of cattails running the length of the watercourse. That's how the wetlands developed in Las Vegas Wash in the first place, purely by accident.

I'll leave you with something I've recently learned during this frustrating ordeal. A big part of the \$13.3 million wetlands bond fund will go to buy up private property in the wash. Clark County already has closed deals on 160 acres with Pacific Coast Building Products Inc., 79 acres with East Tropicana-Silver Bowl Inc., 80 acres with FLT Trust, 52 acres with Jim and Lisa Zagha, 15 acres with JB Investments, and five acres with Adams Associates. The price on those parcels averaged \$7,025 per acre -- not bad for eroded, tamarisk-infested, dried-up swampland in Las Vegas Wash.

More deals are in the works for a 60-acre parcel owned by R.H. Rothstein et al., 40 acres by O & PM Rodeffer Revocable Trust, two 40-acre parcels by Nasser Zaghi, 60 acres owned by Somchai & Pimsiri Suragairin and assorted smaller parcels. I suppose those will go for around \$7,000 an acre, too, the going price for eroded, tamarisk-infested, dried-up swampland in Las Vegas Wash. These land transactions certainly lend new meaning to the phrase, "I've got some swampland I'd like to sell

you!"

I wonder if those landowners ever considered donating their land, or if our elected officials ever considered condemning it, for the public good of building wetlands? I doubt it. Las Vegas didn't get to be known as the "Green Felt Jungle" because of its cattails.

I suppose people who voted for the 1990 park bond issue sincerely thought the money would be used to build wetlands in Las Vegas Wash, like it stated on the ballot question. I'm sure they'll be disappointed to learn most of it will go for studies, consultants and land buyouts. I recall a prominent supporter of the wetlands bond issue told my old friend, Vern Bostick, "I hope none of this bond money will be spent for consultants and studies." I bet he'll go ballistic when he hears how it's actually been spent.

So, it looks like we've been had again, folks. More tax dollars flushed down the drain without a single cattail to show for it. There will never be wetlands in Las Vegas Wash until citizens and our government officials stand up to the political tyrants who continually deceive us and separate us from our hard earned tax dollars on one issue after another of vital importance to this community. That's got to stop if we ever hope to have a sustainable community in Clark County.

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